

Sheriff's Office begins radio-system switch

Interoperability project will link state agencies

Posted: Sunday, January 10, 2010 2:00 am | Updated: 3:15 pm, Mon Jan 11, 2010.

By LYNNETTE HINTZE/Daily Inter Lake

The Flathead County Sheriff's Office has begun its conversion to a new communications network that aims to link law-enforcement and government agencies across Northern Montana.

"We just moved one patrol group over today," Undersheriff Pete Wingert said on Wednesday. "We want to make certain it works before we move the other [five] groups over. We're working the kinks out."

Wingert is referring to the high-capacity microwave network that's being built by the Northern Tier Interoperability Consortium.

Founded in 2004 by 12 counties and four Indian reservations across Northern Montana, the consortium — one of nine such regional partnerships that make up the statewide Interoperability Montana project — was tasked with building a consolidated state-of-the-art secure digital communications network between levels of government and across jurisdictions.

In addition to giving agencies the ability to communicate across the state's northern border region, the consortium also expects to improve homeland security by providing the means for military and civil authorities to communicate by radio.

"This is almost magical stuff," Flathead County Commissioner Joe Brenneman said about the high-tech nature of the network, explaining that various "talk groups" can be connected by a dispatcher simply clicking and dragging frequencies together on a computer screen.

The network will provide a conduit for information transfer between all dispatch centers across the northern region known as the Hi-Line. For example, a suspect's description and mug shot can be shared simultaneously with all dispatch centers and law-enforcement vehicles with mobile data terminals.

"It's a challenge. We're trying to do something never done before," Brenneman said. "We've been adamant that we don't want the state telling us 'this is the radio system you'll use,' so it's important that someone from the county be involved."

Brenneman has taken a leadership role in the project, serving as vice chairman of the interoperability governing body. That has meant attending meetings in Helena once a month, sometimes more often, but the payback to Flathead County already is sizable, he said.

A \$4 million tower on Big Mountain and close to \$1 million in radio equipment grants have been invested in the Flathead.

Statewide, the Interoperability Montana project is expected to cost \$150 million. Funding has come from two dozen state and federal sources.

"Since almost all of my travel has been paid by the IM project there has been negligible cost to the county," Brenneman said. "Actually I think we make money on the deal."

He multitasks while in Helena, going to Montana Association of Counties meetings, working with the Department of Environmental Quality on county projects and lobbying at the Legislature for money and legislation that will benefit Flathead County.

The targeted date of completion for the statewide system is 2012, but it could take longer than that, Brenneman acknowledged. The Kalispell Police Department is now on the system.

“KPD says that when it’s working it’s fantastic,” he said.

The switch from analog to digital radios is a huge undertaking, Wingert said. The new system picks up some dead spots in rural areas, but in some areas where there previously was radio coverage there are now dead spots, he added.

How long it will take the Sheriff’s Office to convert to the new system “will depend on how functional it is.

“Time will tell,” Wingert said.

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